



# Exploring work-family backlash in a public organisation

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to test the belief that work-family practices could have a negative influence in the workplace for non-users of these practices.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A quantitative approach was undertaken, where users and non-users of work-family practices reported on a number of job-related attitudes. Organisational justice theories suggest that employees will report lower attitudes if they feel that they are missing out on some benefit or practice. *T*-tests were used to compare differences in these attitudes between users and non-users.

**Findings** – There were no significant differences in any of the examined attitudes between users and non-users of the organisations' work-family practices.

**Research limitations/implications** – Implications are that firms should not necessarily decline the adoption of work-family practices if they fear a "backlash" from their employees who would not use work-family practices. The authors suggest that the social good these practices may provide might remove any negative feelings towards the organisation by employees who cannot use these practices.

**Practical implications** – Practical implications for public sector organisations might be offering work-family practices that target the widest array of employees. Further, future research into work-family backlash should compare actual users of multiple practices as explored here.

**Originality/value** – This is one of the few papers to explore users and non-users of multiple work-family practices. It confirms previous research into work-family backlash, indicating that the non-users are not adversely affected by work-family practices that they do not or cannot use. However, unlike other studies, this paper explored the use of multiple work-family practices, providing stronger and more realistic findings for managers to have confidence in their work-family practices.

**Keywords** Quality of life, Job satisfaction, Family, Employee turnover

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Due to major demographic changes, issues relating to work and family have become increasingly important for organisations. These changes include the increased participation rates of working women and working mothers, dual-career couples, and single-parent families (Goodstein, 1994; Milliken *et al.*, 1998; Morgan and Milliken, 1992). These changes have been echoed around the world, from the UK to New Zealand. In response to these changes, organisations have adopted work-family practices which are aimed at allowing employees greater balance of their work and



family roles (Goodstein, 1994). Organisations that have adopted work-family practices are often characterised as being progressive and important (Edwards and Rothbard, 2000; Tenbrunsel *et al.*, 1995).

Consequently, public sector organisations have a vested interest in work-family practices as they seek to respond to pressures of financial management (Rama, 1999). Public sector organisations have been characterised as being cumbersome in management structure and slow to respond to change (Farnham and Stevens, 2000). McHugh (2001) noted that local government organisations are required to be more efficient, and this draws more attention to employees and their performance. Work-family practices have been suggested as leading to productivity gains for organisations (Leonard, 1998); by allowing employees to better manage conflicting roles between work and family. For example, an employee might balance a conflict between work and family roles (e.g. a late night work meeting) through flexitime, such as starting later in the day to allow the other working partner time to get home earlier. Durst (1999) stated that “public employers believe they must do more in today’s work environment to attract, retain and increase the productivity of employees” (p. 19). As the public sector typically pays lower salaries than the private sector, work-family practices may also be utilised to attract and retain valuable human resources (Lobel *et al.*, 1999). In response to these challenges, public sector organisations appear to have adopted work-family practise at rates exceeding the private sector. For example, flexitime rates are around 77 per cent in the public sector (Durst, 1999), while only 41 per cent in the private sector (Wood, 1999). This has seen public sector employees reporting greater work-family balance through using work-family practices (Ezra and Deckman, 1996).

Work-family practices are purported to enhance employee effectiveness and productivity (Leonard, 1998; Morgan and Milliken, 1992), thus improving the operations of firms. However, despite growth in work-family practice adoption, critics have argued that there might be detrimental, as well as beneficial, effects from work-family practices (Rothausen *et al.*, 1998). These unfavourable effects have been termed a family-friendly or work-family backlash (Harris, 1997; Jenner, 1994; Rothausen *et al.*, 1998). Support for this effect is found on the Internet, where many sites are dedicated to complaining about inequalities between parents and non-parents (e.g. tax disadvantages), and similarly work-family practices targeting those with dependents over those without dependents (e.g. childcare, parental leave). Since public sector organisations typically offer a wide range of work-family practices (Durst, 1999), it is important to examine work-family backlash within the public sector to determine whether organisational programmes targeting work and family issues have the potential for negative influences on employee attitudes.

### Organisational justice theories

Within the work-family literature, organisational justice theories have been used to explore a number of aspects. These include the fairness (Grover, 1991) and benefits (Grover and Crooker, 1995) of work-family practices, as well as possible backlash effects (Rothausen *et al.*, 1998; Haar *et al.*, 2004). The reason for using organisational justice theories is that employee perceptions of justice can have important effects. For example, studies of downsizing organisations found the survivors had greater organisational commitment if they thought those laid off were treated fairly (Brockner

*et al.*, 1988). Consequently, justice theories suggest that employees will have more positive attitudes towards organisations that they perceive as treating employees fairly (Greenberg, 1990). As such, it has been suggested that non-users of work-family practices will be likely to perceive themselves as being unfairly treated (Rothausen *et al.*, 1998; Haar *et al.*, 2004). This may be because they are not the target group of a practice, such as paid parental leave. As such, we would expect excluded groups (e.g. non-parents) to hold lower or less positive attitudes than users. However, under certain circumstances, employees excluded from benefits might still view them as fair (Grover, 1991). For example, needs-based allocation (Deutsch, 1975; Greenberg, 1987) refers to scarce resources being allocated by need. Consequently, non-user employees might be those with no need, and this might produce non-hostile reactions. We now seek to test organisational justice theories towards work-family practice use.

### Hypotheses

#### *Work-family specific attitudes*

Within the public sector, organisations have received negative reviews regarding their ability to recruit and retain employees (Farnham and Stevens, 2000). Importantly, work-family practices have been associated with recruitment and retention benefits (Lawlor, 1996; McShulskis, 1997; Sailors and Sylvestre, 1994). Therefore, exploring the effects of work-family policies on these benefits is appropriate. Rothausen *et al.* (1998) found a significant difference in recruitment and retention benefits between users and non-users of an on-site childcare centre. It is expected therefore, that employees not using work-family practices would perceive less benefit from work-family programs towards recruitment and retention benefits, than users of the practices:

- H1. Non-users will report significantly lower recruitment and retention benefits than users.

#### *Attitudes towards the job and organisation*

Perceived violations of justice by those employees who are ineligible for rewards can lead to dissatisfaction (Leventhal, 1976; Lerner, 1977; Grover and Crooker, 1995). There is support for a positive relationship between job satisfaction and work-family practice use (Judge *et al.*, 1994; Overman, 1999). Consequently, non-users of work-family practices may be less satisfied about their job than users. However, Rothausen *et al.* (1998) found no significant difference in job satisfaction between users and non-users. Because the present study examines multiple work-family practices, unlike a single practice like the childcare centre used by Rothausen *et al.* (1998), we expect a negative relationship to be found between non-use and job satisfaction:

- H2. Non-users will report significantly lower job satisfaction than users.

Taylor *et al.* (1996) asserted that organisational commitment is about an employee's obligation to the organisation. While work-family practices have been associated with higher employee commitment (Grover and Crooker, 1995; Scandura and Lankau, 1997), perceived violations of organisational justice have been linked to lower commitment (Brockner *et al.*, 1988). Therefore, employees may feel less obligated to their organisation if they feel valuable resources (e.g. work-family practices) are expended that they cannot use. In addition to organisational commitment, employees might also perceive less support from their organisation, through practices targeting certain

groups (e.g. parents) over others (e.g. non-parents). Perceived organisational support reflects the quality of the employee-organisation relationship (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986). While there are similarities between perceived organisational support and organisational commitment, they have been proven to be distinct job outcomes (Settoon *et al.*, 1996). We suggest employees not using work-family practices will perceive significantly less support from their organisation, and have lower organisational commitment, than practice users:

*H3.* Non-users will report significantly lower organisational commitment than users.

*H4.* Non-users will report significantly lower perceived organisational support than users.

Adams (1963) suggested that a response to violations of justice might be withdrawal from the situation, and worker withdrawal from the organisation has been associated with injustice perceptions (Grover and Crooker, 1995; Lerner, 1977; Leventhal, 1976). Since the work-family literature suggests work-family practice use can reduce employee turnover (Engoron, 1997; Lobel *et al.*, 1999), we would expect turnover intention to be higher among employee's who are non-users. These employees may feel their organisation has unjustifiably excluded them, and consequently seek employment elsewhere, where they may receive fairer treatment:

*H5.* Non-users will report significantly higher turnover intention than users.

## Method

Data were collected from a New Zealand local government organisation with 206 employees. Data collection was executed in two waves, with a one-week gap. The logic of this methodology was to reduce issues of common methods variance, ensuring responses to work-family practice use/non-use did not encourage responses to attitudinal questions (e.g. job satisfaction). As such, work-family practice use were explored in the first survey, and a week later, attitudes towards work-family benefits, the job and organisation were explored in the second survey. Both surveys were emailed through the organisation's Intranet, which everyone had access to. A total of 100 survey responses (surveys one and two) were collected for a total response rate of 48.5 per cent. The organisation offers six work-family practices: paid parental leave (six weeks), domestic leave (5 days off a year for dependent/partner care), flextime, a before-and-after-school room, study leave, and an employee assistance programme. The average age of respondents was 41.7 years ( $SD = 9.85$ ), with the majority married (77 per cent) and female (69 per cent). On average employees had 2.4 children, and an average tenure of nine years ( $SD = 8.3$ ). With regard to job types, 27 per cent were white-collar workers and 73 per cent blue-collar workers.

## Measures

Recruitment and retention benefits were measured by asking employees to rate their agreement to the following statements (coded 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree): "Work-family programs help retain employees" and "Work-family programs help attract employees". These were adapted from earlier measures (Kossek and

Nichol, 1992; Rothausen *et al.*, 1998) that focused specifically upon childcare centres. This two-item measure had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.78.

Job satisfaction was measured using a seven-item scale by Lounsbury and Hoopes (1986), coded 1 = extremely dissatisfied and 7 = extremely satisfied. Questions asked employees about aspects of their job and included questions about co-workers, pay and fringe benefits and worksite physical surroundings. The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.83.

Organisational commitment was measured using the 15 items from the Mowday *et al.* (1982) organisational commitment questionnaire. A sample question is "I talk up this organisation to my friends as a great organisation to work for". The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.88.

Perceived organisational support was measured using the Eisenberger *et al.* (1986), 16-item scale (coded 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). A sample question is "The organisation is willing to help me when I need a special favour". This scale had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.92.

Turnover intention was measured using a single item scale from Lounsbury and Hoopes (1986), "All in all, how likely is it that you will try hard to find a job with another organisation within the next 12 months?" (coded 1 = not at all likely, 2 = somewhat likely, 3 = very likely).

Work-family practice use was based on Rothausen *et al.* (1998) with a four item scale, 1 = past use, 2 = present use, 3 = anticipated use, 4 = never used. This study examined use of the organisation's six work-family practices: paid parental leave, domestic leave, flextime, a before-and-after-school room, study leave and the employee assistance programme. Employee non-use were recoded as 0 = any past/present/future use, 1 = total non-use (never used any of the practices).

### *Analysis*

A methodological approach to comparing users and non-users of multiple work-family practices has been established (Haar *et al.*, 2004). Using that approach, *H1-H5* were all tested by independent sample *t*-test, where the test variables were the criterion variables (recruitment and retention benefits, job satisfaction, organisational commitment, perceived organisational support, and turnover intention), and the grouping variable was work-family practice use (use = 0, non-use = 1). This allows all five attitudes to be compared between users of work-family practices and non-users.

### **Results**

Work-family practice utilisation frequencies were 60 per cent flexible work practices, 36 per cent domestic leave, 31 per cent study leave, 30 per cent employee assistance program, 19 per cent paid parental leave and 14 per cent after school room. Frequencies regarding use of number of practices were 20 per cent used none, 30 per cent used only one, 17 per cent used two, 14 per cent used three, 14 per cent used four, 2 per cent used five, and 3 per cent used all six practices.

Descriptive statistics for all the study variables are shown in Table I.

Table I shows that job satisfaction is significantly correlated with organisational commitment ( $r = 0.60$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), perceived organisational support ( $r = 0.64$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and turnover intention ( $r = -0.47$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Organisational commitment is correlated significantly with perceived organisational support ( $r = 0.69$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

and turnover intention ( $r = -0.31$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Finally, perceived organisational support was significantly correlated with turnover intention ( $r = -0.37$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Overall, the mean scores for employee attitudes on average were positive, but not overly so.

Results of the  $t$ -tests for all attitudes are shown in Table II.

The results indicate that there is no significant difference in attitudes towards work-family specific attitudes. Therefore, there is no support for  $H1-H5$ .

#### *Work-family practice use*

Further analyses by  $t$ -tests were conducted on work-family practice use and six demographic variables to explore which groups are more likely to use work-family practices. There were no differences in work-family practice use by gender, marital status, parental status, and no differences among overtime workers, managers, and those employees whose partners are working. Overall, this indicates no significant difference between users of the work-family practices among a variety of demographic variables.

### Discussion

The focus of this paper was to explore the potential for negative attitudes between users and non-users of work-family practices. Given the increasing pressures on public sector organisations to improve efficiency, adopting work-family programmes appears an inviting opportunity. However, without clearer understanding of the potential for backlash from employees not using the practices, employers might be wary. The concern that non-users would be less committed, less satisfied, and more likely to leave the organisation was not found. The lack of any significant differences amongst all attitudes provides no evidence of a backlash effect, and supports a needs-based

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Recruitment and retention benefits	3.8	0.87	–					
2. Job satisfaction	4.6	0.92	–0.01	–				
3. Organisational commitment	4.6	0.83	0.04	0.60**	–			
4. Perceived organisational support	4.4	0.98	0.08	0.64**	0.69**	–		
5. Turnover intention	1.5	0.72	0.18	–0.47**	–0.31**	–0.37**	–	
6. Total work-family use	0.80	0.40	0.12	–0.02	0.12	0.09	0.02	–

Notes:  $n = 100$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$

**Table I.**  
Correlations and  
descriptive statistics of  
the study variables

Criterion variables	Non-users ( $n = 20$ )		Users ( $n = 80$ )		$t$ -test	Significance
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Recruitment and retention benefits	3.6	0.88	3.9	0.86	–1.230	n.s.
Job satisfaction	4.7	1.0	4.6	0.89	0.186	n.s.
Perceived organisational support	4.3	1.0	4.5	0.97	–0.894	n.s.
Organisational commitment	4.4	0.85	4.6	0.82	–1.197	n.s.
Turnover intention	1.5	0.68	1.5	0.73	–0.207	n.s.

**Table II.**  
Mean comparisons:  
work-family specific  
attitudes



allocation principle, where non-using employees might simply be those who have no need or desire for their use.

Analysis of users of the work-family practices indicated that there was no significance difference among a host of demographic indicators, including gender, parental and marital status, and job types (managers vs non-managers). Consequently, there is no difference among users with respect to groups that might be expected to be non-users, and thus be offended by practices targeting specific groups. For example, males and non-parents are as likely to use the work-family practices as females and parents, indicating that the six work-family practices offered by this organisation have some universal appeal to employees. It might be that the number and type of work-family practices offered allow greater potential use by the general population of employees – negating the potential for any specific group to be isolated and thus, resentful. Three of the six practices target the family only (paid parental leave, domestic leave, and the before-and-after-school-room), and means that not all practices are targeted at specific groups (e.g. family). Given that flexitime is the most popular work-family practice, and this practice could be utilised by all employees for any reason, including work, family, or personal (e.g. exercise), may create an environment where work-family practices are perceived as general, and not parental specific practices. This in turn might eliminate the potential for any backlash effects.

The failure to find any significant differences in attitudes towards the job and organisation are similar to other work-family backlash studies (Haar *et al.*, 2004; Rothausen *et al.*, 1998). This indicates that employees may not be as ready to backlash against their organisation or job as would be suggested by organisational justice theories. In addition, the present study found no significant differences between users/non-users regarding the recruitment and retention benefits of work-family practices. This finding is different from Rothausen *et al.* (1998), who did find a backlash effect. However, that study explored a childcare centre, and it might be in exploring multiple work-family practices, with wider appeal towards what the work-family practices can be used for (e.g. personal use, not just family related), means employee feelings about use and need are more adequately tapped. It appears, from the few studies conducted, that exploring use and non-use of multiple work-family practices (Haar *et al.*, 2004) may provide a clearer and more accurate evaluation of employee feelings towards work-family practices. Employees offered multiple work-family practices probably have greater opportunity for their individual needs to be met by the practices. Needs-based allocation means that employees will not perceive injustices if they believe scarce resources are allocated by need. This public sector organisation, by offering multiple work-family practices, may provide employees with ample opportunities for their needs to be met, whether related to work, family, or personal need. As such, non-users would be those employees without need for any of the practices. Consequently, they would not perceive any injustice from non-using work-family practices, and thus have no backlash effect.

There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that while work-family backlash might gain some attention in the press, the actual effects are minimal. Rothausen *et al.* (1998) argued that work-family backlash had little effect on employee attitudes and thus might actually be media sensationalism. These assertions were supported by Haar *et al.* (2004), who found no significant difference between users and non-users towards multi-dimensional constructs of organisational commitment, turnover, and

attitudes towards work-family practices and their users. In a similar vein, this study pushes the boundaries of the Rothausen *et al.* (1998) study by exploring multiple work-family practices, and comparing mean scores between users and non-users, and ultimately draws similar conclusions. As such, this organisation's multiple work-family practices appears to lead to no backlash effects among its employees. As such, public sector employers should not refrain from adopting work-family practices simply because of a backlash fear. It appears, at least within this local government organisation, that employees recognise the need of users, and perhaps also that the organisation is providing a social good through certain practices. For example, non-users of the before-and-after-school room may realise that working parents can continue to work while their children are safe on-site, and see this as a social good provided by the organisation. Further, practice non-use appears to be related to lack of need, rather than being purposefully excluded by the organisation, which might lead to feelings of injustice. Hence, work-family practice users are probably those who need the additional support and flexibility the most. Combined, these provide some answers towards why no hostile reactions were found in this organisation.

### Limitations

As with any study, there are some limitations that should be considered. Among these would be the New Zealand environment, the low number of respondents, the single organisation sample, and the use of self-reported data. While New Zealand might be a "typical" Western economy, its size may provide differences that should be considered. Differences include the size of organisations, where only 1.1 per cent of firms employee more than 50 employees (New Zealand Statistics, 1998). In addition, work-family practices have not been as extensive in New Zealand as they are in the USA (Callister, 1996). As such, the number of organisations offering work-family practices may be limited; potentially leading New Zealand employee's to be satisfied with any practices offered and not resentful of them. Nevertheless, work-family practices are a common benefit within the New Zealand public sector, which should allow for any resentment towards the practices to surface. Further, the findings here are similar to other studies set in New Zealand and the USA, which provides support for the notion that the work-family backlash may be mostly propaganda and hype. It is also worth noting that organisations may offer more or less work-family practices than explored here which encourages further studies of work-family practices and use/non-use. Further, some organisations do offer practices of high value (e.g. on-site childcare centres), which might provoke greater hostile reactions from non-users.

### Conclusions

Overall, there is no evidence to suggest that offering work-family programmes can have a negative influence on non-users in this organisation. Findings from the present study, combined with other related studies, suggest that public sector organisations that seek to adopt work-family practices can do so without fear of any backlash effect. The present study also offers public sector organisations mechanisms for testing existing work-family practice use, and this might easily be explored on existing organisational data including performance, absenteeism and turnover. For example, are non-users absent more than users of work-family practices? Overall, organisational justice theories do encourage firms to look at existing practices, benefits, and actions



(including future adoption of practices), as evidence exists to indicate those excluded from use, or perceiving aspects as unfair, can potentially hold hostile reactions. Given that work-family practices have grown in number and enjoy high adoption rates in the public sector, this study goes some way towards allaying fears these practices might be more divisive than productive. Further, the lack of differences in work-family practice use by demographic variables should encourage organisations to adopt practices that are desired and usable by as wider group of employees as possible. This should allay any feelings of exclusion, and remedy potential organisational injustice feelings.

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